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REACTIVE POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Abstract:

We live in the twenty-first century, which witnessed by far the most intensive marketing of politics, and traditional approaches (The Great Man Theory, *situational, relational*) to the process of emergence of political leadership are simply not enough. Cooperation between leaders and their followers is determined by cultural and social context, specific political situation of the time, patterns of social behavior. Development of new information technologies and dissemination of the means of mass communication have introduced another factor to the analyzed process, forced by civilisational changes. These changes initiated the processes shaping the emergence of a fourth approach to political leadership, which we may call *reactive*. Reactivity is an active process of management of the changing image of the leader, responding to the evolving social preferences, and subsequently disseminated through the media.

Key words:

political leadership, reactive leadership

Traditional approaches to the process of emergence of political leadership have been recognized to fit along three main models [Turska-Kawa 2013]. The first of these – *subjective*, dominated in the first half of the twentieth century; it focused the attention of researchers on the person of the political leader – and leader's personal qualities, motivation and other psychological characteristics that determine the effectiveness of the function exercised. This approach is known commonly as the The Great Man Theory. According to its major assumptions, presented for the first time by Thomas Carlyle [1907], the flow of history can be explained by the influence of great individuals with extraordinary qualities. In his works, the author claimed that the history of the world is

in fact a biography of outstanding men [Bennett 2011: 396]. While analyzing the great historical figures (such as Luther, Shakespeare, Rousseau, Napoleon), Carlyle expressed the belief that personal deep inspirations and characteristics have resulted in great historical twists and turns. These arguments were further supported by Frederick A. Woods [1913], who – on the basis of analysis of hundreds of European rulers – formulated the thesis that their individual skills and abilities determined the quality of the reign and the country they ruled as well. The studies carried out by scientists-proponents of the subjective approach one can see three distinct lines of analysis, attributing the exceptional nature of a given leader to different features. The first focuses on personality traits of political leaders¹, the second on specific behaviors of a given individual², and the last finally emphasizes particular motives of political leaders³.

The second approach, *situational*, has gained recognition in the mid-twentieth century, and pointed to the importance of context-specific conditions for the crystallization of political leadership [Sternberg, Antonakis, Cianciolo, 2004: 148]. It moved the main focus of discussion from the subject to his or her surroundings. According to this school of thought, the "spirit of the time" (*The Zeitgeist Theory*) determines whether an individual becomes a political leader. Consequently, leadership emergence is a result of a specific series of events, and an individual need not have specific pre-defined characteristics [Jakubowska 2002: 91; Elms 1976, Stone 1974].

The second half of the last century was a period of integration of the two approaches identified above, finally joining to form "a third way" – the *relational* approach to political leadership that focuses on the relationships between the leaders and their followers. Leadership in the relational approach is determined by the characteristics of the parties to this relationship. Each of the persons involved – political leader and supporters (voters) – brings an individual contribution to the relationship. As autonomous entities, all actors in the relationship have their own personality structures – own traits, values; they experience specific needs and have a personal perception of socio-political reality,

¹ For example self-assessment [Potocka-Hoser 1985; Barner-Barry, Rosenwein 1985: 64-65; Barber 1985; Sniderman 1975: 269 and following], traits featured in Paul Costa and Robert McCrae's five factor personality model [Simonton 1986: 149-160; Rubenzer, Faschingbauer, Ones 2000: 403-420; de Sutter 2009: 179 and following], self-acceptance [Potocka-Hoser 1985], optimism [Zullow, Seligman 1990: 52-61; Satterfield, Seligman 1994: 77-82]

² Model of decision-making [White, Lippitt 1960], leadership style [Lasswell 2001]

³ Motivation of achievements, affiliation and power [Winter 2002: 25 and following; Winter 2003: 122 and subsequent]; influence, affiliation, identification, achievements, impact on life in the country [Skarżyńska 1996 (A): 67-81; Skarżyńska 1996 (B): 45-60]; risk-taking [Alluto, Hrebiniak 1995. After: Bass 2008: 181; McClelland 1965: 389-392; Schere 1981; Wallach, Kogan, Bern 1962: 75-86; Marquis 1962: 8-23]

what largely determines their behavior. Building a leadership relationship in the analyzed context is an interaction of the parties, whose contribution impacts the final characteristics of this relationship. This contribution can also be described as certain psychological expectations of one party towards the other. It is expected that the other party will in a satisfactory manner meet the needs, and achieve objectives set by the values of the other party – thus responding to their personality traits. Incidental relationships – based on momentary fascination or pursuing of short-term goals – will be short-lived, because their foundation does not rest in the (relatively) stable psychological dispositions of individuals.

The approaches to emergence of political leadership presented above only on the surface seem to constitute separate fields of study. In fact, each of these approaches has paved the way for the next, which merely shifts the focus of research, expanding it to include new context. However, we live in the twenty-first century, which witnessed by far the most intensive marketing of politics, and these approaches are simply not enough. Cooperation between leaders and their followers is determined by cultural and social context, specific political situation of the time, patterns of social behavior. Development of new information technologies and dissemination of the means of mass communication have introduced another factor to the analyzed process, forced by civilizational changes. These changes initiated the processes shaping the emergence of a fourth approach to political leadership, which we may call *reactive*. Reactivity is an active process of management of the changing image of the leader, responding to the evolving social preferences, and subsequently disseminated through the media.

Determinants of changes in the process of emergence of political leadership

Media play a key role in communicating and have – for good – become fixtures of our daily life. Jerzy Mikulowski Pomorski [2008: 21-22] notes that as part of the human environment, media can be seen two-way. Firstly, as part of the physical and social environment: a newspaper, a radio, television set, computer (additions by A.T.K.), and secondly – in their institutional and symbolic form, as part of the environment, acting as carriers of customs, opinions, values and languages or – in the case of identification by the receiver of the sender with the channel – as the author of the content. With the development of technology, speed of media functioning, increased availability etc., more and more researchers began to focus attention on the potential impact of the media on public attitudes. Said "impact" can be defined as intentional or unintentional effects of media use. The types of effects can be classified according to various

characteristics. Joseph Klapper [1960: 456-457] list the following categories: *conversion* (change of opinion or belief according to the intention of the message sender), *small change* (change of form or scale of knowledge, belief or behavior) and *reinforcement* (strengthening of the receiver's opinion, belief or pattern of behavior). Kurt and Gladys Lang [1981. After: McQuail 2008: 457] draw attention to other types of media impact: *mutual interactions* (effects of being the subject of media communication, interaction between the media and the subject of their interest), *the boomerang effect* (resulting in changes contrary to the desired ones) and the *third party effect* (referring to the common belief of individuals that the media may affect others, but not them). Hilde Himmelweit [After: Mikulowski Pomorski 2008: 17-18] indicates two types of effects: *the effect of displacement* (the amount of time consumed by media use during a week, or year) and the *stimulus effect* (related to the impact of the content on the life and behavior of the receiver).

It is impossible to deny the significant role of the media in the life of societies – it is equally difficult, however, to categorically determine the nature of this impact. Recalling the achievements of functionalist analysts [see more in: Turska-Kawa 2011], it should be noted that most of the media functions mentioned by researchers are conducive to social inclusion. Social integration is an important value. It does not signify the unification of views and beliefs; elimination of what is different from the dominant model. It does, certainly, assume universalization of certain socially recognized standards, beliefs and values, however, it stresses the importance of simultaneously maintaining individual identities of religious, local, cultural groups. Universality means social approval and acceptance of the standards, beliefs and values, and cooperation to maintain and protect them. Integration can be defined as unity in diversity and variety. Stanisław Michalczyk [2008: 330-341] points out, however, that nowadays we should not overestimate the integration function of the media. As arguments he employs the widening of the media offer, growing number of TV and radio channels, increased variety of newspapers, and the more and more intense communication online – all these phenomena contribute to fragmentation of the media audience. On the other hand, there are studies which indicate that the media can even cause degradation of social capital, discourage social activity and weaken interpersonal relations [Wojtasik 2011: 29]. Analyzing the causes of decline of the social capital in American society, Robert Putnam [2008] points out that the systematic lengthening of the time devoted to watching TV has blocked other changes in the way the Americans spend their time. Technological advances allow the individual to obtain satisfaction, but they do so at the expense of external social bonds, thus hurting the interests of not only individuals but also the community.

Marshall McLuhan [2004] notes that characteristics of each media type makes cause the medium itself to become the message. Each media has its own rules, thus the message transmitted by them is reinforced by their specific form. Some media are used without the need for individuals to fully focus on them; the message can be received while the audience are simultaneously performing other tasks. It is somewhat dangerous as this process partially displaces rational processing of the communications received. Radio is an obvious example, but television also belongs to this group. In the case of the Internet, we must consider the time commitment required by its use, but also certain competencies necessary for its use. Internet also has the greatest degree of content dynamics, as well as attractiveness, based largely on the variety of forms. Reading the press does not require this type of competence. However, it should be stressed, more and more periodicals transfer their activities also to the Internet in order to reach the largest possible public – consequently, impact of the press content is intensified.

According to one of the fundamental assumptions of the theory of *uses and gratifications*, media are only one of the sources meeting the needs of the individual, and whether and how they attract the attention of customers and successfully compete with other sources depends on the media themselves. The public, aware of their needs, sees sources that most satisfactorily will meet their desires. Therefore the transmitted message must take on the form that to the fullest extent answers these identified needs. As a consequence, the message is required to have specific characteristics, which will make its content and form attractive for the receivers. Since the final content of communications transmitted is decided by journalists, they may significantly – through content management - influence the opinions and beliefs prevailing in society. The content presented in the media should be created in accordance with the principles of reliability, diversity and quality of information. In reality, however, different kinds of "approaches" and transformations used when constructing the content make the journalists the true creators of the desired social and political reality. Media bias is most often seen in three areas: selection of content, presentation method and allocation of media time to a given message.

Selection of materials for distribution is mainly associated with the decision regarding the specific information to be included and elimination of that which will not enter into public circulation. It is difficult to estimate the determinants of the mechanisms associated with selection, and to estimate with reliability its function and scale, as this activity is largely done at the editing stage. Dan Berkowitz [1990 (A): 55-68. After: Cwalina, Falkowski 2006: 276-27] attempted to assess the factors influencing the selection of information, stated that the main aspects taken into account by the *gatekeepers* were: freshness

of information ($r = 0.36$) and its predicted importance to the public ($r = 0.22$). In other studies by the same author, the most important selection criterion was found to be the assessment of the news attractiveness ($r = 0.46$) [Berkowitz 1990 (B): 245-251]. Another phenomenon associated with the selection of materials in the media is the development of an interpretation framework. It is a way of presenting content that is associated with establishing a certain interpretation axis, specific approach to particular issues, showing the problem from a defined perspective. Wojciech Cwalina and Andrzej Falkowski [2006: 273] quote the opinion of Holli Semetko and Patti Valkenburg that adoption of a particular perspective results in changes in opinion about a problem, caused by subtle differences in its definition. In other words, as a consequence some of the attributes of the object or event are more emphasized in the message, giving rise to a certain way of their interpretation, and their being taken into consideration when forming opinions.

Presentation of material concerns the external features of the news disseminated to the public by the media. Some distortions in this area may include the tendency to present the candidates favoured by editors or journalists of a given medium in a more favorable light, allotting them more "screen" time, placing the relevant content in key areas in the medium. These activities are grounded in the psychological phenomenon called the exposure effect, described by Robert B. Zajonc. The effect described is that the more an object is exposed, present, the more popular it becomes⁴. A study by Agnieszka Turska-Kawa [2010: 120-135], in which the author employed content analysis of three platforms of information on the Internet in the period before the European Parliament elections in 2009, shows the significance of these factors. The above study has shown that Internet journalists not only perpetuate the system division into two major parties, but also presents their completely different images. From the analyzed material emerged a much more favorable image of the Civic Platform (PO) party than that of the Law and Justice (PiS). One cannot also talk about pluralism of information – quantity of content focused on PiS is much higher, while quality-wise PO comes out the winner. These materials are quite different in content, indicating the preferences of Internet users are favourable to PO (maintaining a positive image of the party), while the the

⁴ Explanation of this phenomenon is based on the thesis that liking a given object is rooted in one's recognition of it. The exposure effect, however, is not the main determinant of individual beliefs, and occurs only in specific circumstances. The object needs to be initially neutral, or at least not averse (repeated exposure to an object we dislike usually only strengthens this reaction); the object cannot be exposed too often, as it may lead to boredom. Furthermore, increased exposure is more beneficial to complex objects; with simple ones the effect of boredom is much more significant as well. The exposure effect is further strengthened when the object is little known. [For more see: Strelau, Doliński 2008: 339-340].

opposition, PiS, is characterized in negative terms. The level of the indicator disturbing the quantitative balance is another factor important from the point of view of reliability of the media – the need to ensure pluralism of information, opportunity for all political actors to present their views and positions (taken into account is whether an equivalent amount of time for expression of opinion was provided within a given period, and duration of exposure of a given politician in news programs, as well as the size of the publication).

Another important factor affecting the changes in the process of emergence of political leadership is the growing importance and development of public opinion polling. Surveys aimed at exploring the opinions and attitudes of society concerning a given phenomenon, diagnosis of expectations and needs of the citizens have a significant impact primarily in two areas. Primo, polls carried out on behalf of political parties may serve to initiate specific actions expected by society, to modify actions already taken, to change the image of the object to better respond to the needs of voters or to adapt a new image of the diagnosed needs of the electorate. The results of most of these polls are not made public, and serve only those who commissioned them to plan practical measures. As indicated by Philip Kotler [1975], the priority goal of political parties competing in the pre-election period is to accurately diagnose the needs, interests and values of potential voters, and – in response to the results of this diagnosis – to present themselves in a manner best suited to the social demand. Systematic extensive polling enables this process. Election polls are nowadays the key element and starting point for all decisions made and actions undertaken by the candidates during the campaign. In view of the objectives of these poll results, researchers differentiate several types of polls:

- a) *benchmark polls*, implemented at the beginning of the campaign and serving as information sources for the planning process. These polls can reveal, for example, to what extent the voters recognize the candidate's name or how she or he is perceived among potential voters.
- b) *follow-up polls*, focusing on a few specific issues which should immediately be addressed, directed at monitoring of opinion on issues touched upon and actions taken during the campaign.
- c) *tracking polls*, carried out regularly during the campaign; their aim is to evaluate the effectiveness of strategies and tactics employed during the campaign, diagnosis of its dynamics and direction.

At the same time, the introduction of a completely new entity onto the political scene is also done following multi-level polls and surveys that diagnose the needs of the electorate – those undecided and those that, if appropriately encouraged, may change the direction of their vote. If we assume, after

Wojciech Cwalina and Andrzej Falkowski [2006: 153], that the political image is a particular kind of designed representation that intends, by providing the object with certain association, to add value and enrich it with additional characteristics, the logical consequence is that polls provide the most complete answer to the question of *what values and additional characteristics these should be*.

Secondly, the reach of dissemination of results of opinion polls should be noted, as they not only will serve as information source, but also modify the prevailing social attitudes and beliefs. Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann [1984] by presenting foundations of the *spiral of silence theory* shows how the media can influence public opinion, helping to marginalize certain positions that are not consistent with views postulated by the mass media content senders. The means of mass communication, through presentation of public opinion polls disseminate the dominant point of view, and thus deter people from either taking the opposite stance, or voicing this opinion. If the process takes place in a smaller social group, it can be a manifestation of the collapse of the system of values and norms of that group. Depending on whether this crisis is temporary or permanent, it may lead to re-integration of the group or its total collapse, when members begin to look for new social affiliations. Regardless of the type of crisis, however, the media act as a catalyst for the above processes. Where the outlined phenomenon occurs on a social larger scale, and includes a variety of groups and communities, we are dealing with the mechanism of the spiral of silence, which pulls individuals into a paradox of sorts: to ensure social acceptance, he or she resigns from forming own thoughts and views on certain topics, withdrawing from discussion. On the one hand, the phenomenon protects the individual's relationships with the surrounding environment, on the other hand, however, these very relationships are built on silence and misconceptions, which certainly has an impact on their quality and level of social trust.

Both the development of transmission technology and dissemination of information, increased strength and importance of the media in society, as well as the increasing possibility of using extensive opinion polls in the race for power are one of the key determinants of the process of the emergence of a reactive political leader. These factors translate into a new kind of leadership and new methods of reaching potential voters.

Features of reactive political leadership

Traditional models of political leadership - *subjective, situational and relational* - are objectively different approaches, hypothetical constructs that by a certain simplification of a relevant part of reality through elimination of certain of its elements (attributes, relationships) allow researchers to focus their

attention on another selected aspect. The aim of this approach is the greater penetration of the factor under analysis, what is an important contribution to the broader studies⁵. The changing circumstances, in particular appearance of new factors described above, makes these models too simplistic for the modern times, as they do not adequately describe the process of emergence of political leadership. Taking this into account, one must acknowledge there is a need to build a new model that takes into account the aforementioned changes.

The presented model takes into account both the characteristics of the subject, the situation and the specific relationship between the potential voters and the leader – yet each of these elements takes a new shape. Reactivity in the described approach is associated with impulsivity of the parties to the relationship – the political leaders and her or his potential supporters - regarding their own needs, desires that shape the behavior of the other party. The fundamental task of the leader is to match the expectations of the audience, what in turn determines the leader's behavior. This adjustment is done based on the results of professional polling of expectations and social preferences, which are an important part of the evolution of a relational leadership towards a reactive model, and therefore one more quickly adapting to the changing reality⁶.

Political needs focused on the acquisition and retention of power become so dominant that the actual characteristics of the subject are overshadowed by those expected by potential voters. It should be noted that this is not a completely fluid, 100% adjustment – the leader needs to build the socially expected image on the foundation of specific competencies and core traits. This accommodation is not an act, but a process, fitted around the change dynamics of the needs and expectations of the voters. This process implies constant interactions between parties of the leadership relationship, and measuring of their effectiveness in the context of development of political leadership. The process specified above is dynamic, and an important factor is its duration, which translates into consistency of the perceived image.

If the behavior and characteristics of the leader are consistent over time, then the image is validated and allows voters to freely predict the leader's

⁵ Majority of researchers nowadays agree that while defining political leadership one must consider many elements, each with a separate significance. Among the key ones should be names: personality and traits of the leader, personalities and traits of the voters and other people whom the leader confronts, social and organizational context of the above confrontations, current problems and issues the leader must face, interpretation of the law by the leader, methods of reaching the planned – and socially relevant – goals, effects of the leader's actions. [Masciulli, Molchanov, Knight 2009: 5-6].

⁶ Waldemar Wojtasik, while analyzing factors that determine the success of a new political grouping on the political scene emphasizes for example making references to socially significant issues, important for the voters and capable of influencing their electoral behavior and decision [Wojtasik 2012A: 160 and following].

behavior. At the same time, this very predictability gives voters some sense of security, as they can deduce freely the leader's other qualities – this need is rooted in the human drive to understand the causes of behavior, predict it and control the events. The more consistent the environment (as least on the level of perception), the more it offers individuals the sense of security and stability. An observer captures the reality, and can predict and control it only by referencing transitional and variable behavior and events to some other, relatively unchanging conditions that lie at its core [Heider 1958: 79 After: McGraw 2008: 364]. The need to preserve a stable and coherent system of representation of experience is also one of four needs active in the human experiential system, to which Seymour Epstein assigns fundamental importance [Epstein 2003 (A): 51, Epstein 2003 (B): 162-163].

In the presented approach, an integral part of the process of emergence of political leadership are mass communication means, which play an important role as an intermediary between the potential and actual leader and the society, modifying and re-orienting the scope of interactions of the parties to the relationship. On the one hand, therefore, the media have an important function in the process of crystallization of political leaders, constituting the political arena of the struggle for the support of voters and, on the other hand, provide reactive interactions between the factual political leaders and their followers. It is the increasing speed of information and development of new information technologies, giving the media the opportunity to influence society, that largely influenced the changes in the quality of political leadership. Access to the mass media gave interested parties the ability to track the actions of leaders and at the same time to form their own opinions on his or her person and the actions undertaken. The immediate effect of this change is the greater attention paid to the art of image creation. [Lilleker 2006:30 and subsequent].

The process of formation of the relationship between the politician and his or her supporters, as a result of which the politician gains their support and thus receives a mandate of trust once the election comes, is not mandatory for either party [Wojtasik 2012B: 67]. Politicians are increasingly aware, however, that exposure in the media is often an integral part of the struggle for power. They play a certain kind of spectacle in front of the audience - the voters - to gain their support, which is equivalent to the gaining of power [Cwalina, Falkowski 2006: 147]. The activity of the viewer-voter is their own autonomous decision – they have the freedom to choose the medium that they find most reliable, have the right to regulate to what extent the message penetrates, and can also completely withdraw from following the actions of a given politician. Policy of the media focused on gaining interest of as many viewers as possible enforces specific content and form of the message - therefore as an

intermediary between the leaders and potential receivers, the media not only play the role of the transmitter, but they act as a kind of gatekeeper, rejecting all information that is ordinary, boring and not affecting. Thus the attention paid by politicians seeking leadership to having an „appropriate” image is not focused solely on the needs of voters, but also on the needs of receivers of specific media messages [Turska-Kawa, Wojtasik 2013: 42].

Intermediary of the media in the process of building a relationship between the political leader and the followers assumes the message will be simplified and shortened. The need for simplification is dictated primarily by the duration of transmission, and the need to reach the widest possible audience. The consequence thereof are two main issues. Firstly, the selectivity of information. As noted by Sławomir Sierakowski, the media need a certain type of politicians - those who shine on television, and are willing to participate in discussions on ritual topics with experts-columnists. The aim is to create a show that will help sell advertising time [S. Sierakowski and P. Najszub... 2009: 23]. Thus, the competencies that can broadly be described as “media skills” are required more than the typical leadership ones. Leaders are aware of this situation, and their actions are adequately market-oriented. It is worth noting that nowadays one can even indicate a specific breed of politicians aspiring to gain more and more followers - the so-called “media darlings,” who put self-promotion and image building first. Actions directed at achieving these goals focus primarily on the study of polls and giving interviews [Żukiewicz 2007: 419]. Second comes the matter of “staging” the information. The manner of presenting information in the media is aimed at getting the public interested, thus it requires a specific form. The viewer receives not only the “information”, but also the key to their understanding and interpretation. The criterion for information selection is not their objective relevance, but their appeal and show-stopper potential. More and more often also, real information is being replaced by the fictional “media facts” (so-called factoids), created in their entirety by the media and not being in any way a reflection of real events. They obtain a semblance of reality in their dissemination though, and very often have tangible consequences in the world outside the media. [Michalak 2010: 139]. After the (media) facts are revealed, the leader in question is forced to provide explanations and demonstrate the falsehood of the information, trying to stop it from affecting his or her image in the eyes of the viewer-voter.

Politicians who are not present in the media, are also virtually non-existent in public consciousness - and thus their chances of attaining a leadership role are minimal. A politician seen speaking in the media, commenting on current events, invited to participate in discussions, is much more often socially perceived as an expert, given a mandate of confidence by the party, what

certainly affects not only the recognition of her or his name among voters, but also increases personal authority, which in turn may translate into electoral vote. The paradox lies in that a politician whose presence in the media is suddenly interrupted will most likely be perceived as one who has been "taken off the air" because of the loss of party or media confidence in his or her person, or because someone more competent was found as replacement. Less frequently this sudden absence would be explained by the public by, for example, the need to attend to some important professional duties.

Managing the presence of potential leaders in the media, in particular during election campaigns, is therefore an important element of reaching voters. Political marketing experts are trying to influence the media to focus the audience's attention on specific individuals and present the candidates in the desired manner. Creation of appropriate actions is based on the empirical diagnosis of social expectations. The relational model was based on political "intuition", the reactive model has its foundation in the precise delivery of specific content answering identifiable changes in expectations. Thanks to this characteristic, reactive political leadership is much more dynamic and variable over time than the previous models used. Yet it is also more ephemeral, less stable and its impact on the voters is mostly long-term.

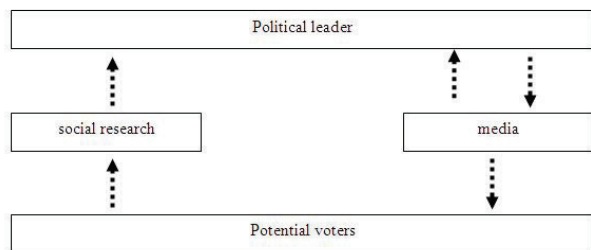
Taking into account the above considerations, the media, due to the increasing technological capabilities and social response, based on the intensity of the impact on the receivers, cease to be a means of transmitting information only, but serve also as creators of the message. By staging a kind of spectacle in front of the audience, they invite a set of actors-politicians, and edit certain information for their own use. In this production, although clearly set requirements for the quality of information exist, elements of truth and fiction collide. In the process of building relationships between political leaders and their followers, the role of real competence and ability of an individual – once playing a significant role in gaining leadership position – is reduced. Meanwhile, new attributes are gaining importance. Among them come into prominence those which determine a positive relationship of a given politician with the dominant mass media: personal attractiveness to the media (physical accessibility, public speaking skills) and ability to influence the media, in order to orient their impact on voting behaviour of viewers in the desired direction. This direction of change can be summarized paraphrasing the words of Manuel Castells – every power has to go through the media [Dybel, Wróbel 2008: 67].

Model approach

Illustration 1 shows the fundamental interactions in the new model of emergence of political leadership. The main change concerns the relationship between the political leader and potential voters. Its foundation are the needs, expectations and preferences of citizens with the right to vote, and for whose votes political actors compete in the election campaigns. These needs, expectations and preferences give direction to the activities of political leaders. Specialist polls of opinions and social attitudes enable their diagnosis, and allow one to adapt to them to the fullest both the public image and the activities of a given political actor. These actions are intended to form a specific message, shaped on the basis of polls and research, that will in turn reach specific groups of voters who – potentially – eagerly await exactly such a message. By consequence, it is more likely their reaction to the message will take the desired direction – support given to a particular candidate, most accurately meeting to their expectations, thus giving her or him a chance to obtain a leadership position.

Reaching the potential voters is not a direct action, but is done through the mass media. In this context, two issues should be stressed. First, the broad public access to the media, which gives the possibility of tracking the activity of political leaders. Politicians are increasingly aware that the media provide them with an opportunity to appear in the public consciousness, and commentary on current events in the media, presenting themselves as experts or participation in popular television programs is an important element in the process of reaching out to potential voters. Therefore, without such participation in this process it would be difficult for them to gain exposure as a leader. Second, one should keep in mind that neither the politicians aspiring to leadership nor leaders themselves decide on the content and form of the message which is passed to the public – all this is done by journalists. Political actors wanting to create and maintain their place in the media must therefore comply with the policies of the mass media, based primarily on the desire to garner the greatest possible interest in the message. From this perspective, a politician will be of potential interest to journalists if he or she has specific competencies, not relevant to the leadership role, but that will be attractive to the public. Hence, politicians in their activity must adapt not only to the needs of potential voters, but also to the needs of the media, among which the most prominent ones are the sensational nature of the content and availability of the politician.

Illustration 1. Model of reactive political leadership



Source: own materials.

The politics presented in the media, the shape of which is dictated by their specific needs, is a platform with particular characteristics, wherein the actions of politicians within the framework of their professional duties are increasingly repressed in favour of the unconventional and sensational. The message presented in that manner certainly shapes the overall image of politics, and moderates the needs of receivers-voters formulated with respect to politicians. The politics presented superficially and reduced to news, schemas and scandals may cause in the electorate the expectation of integrity, reliability, conscientiousness from their potential political leaders. But do duty, incorruptibility, honesty have a chance to break through the journalist gatekeepers? Is politics today only that which takes place in the media, a spectacle? Where, if at all, exists a place for politicians who, preoccupied with work responsibilities, simply do not have time to appear in the media? And finally, what determines political leadership nowadays – are those the political competencies of given individuals, or the media ones? The author leaves unanswered the question of consequences of the reactive model of leadership for the quality of political leadership.

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